Black History Month

February 2017

Black History Month

Black History Month, also known as National African American History Month, is an annual celebration of achievements by African Americans and a time for recognizing the central role they have played in our nation's history.

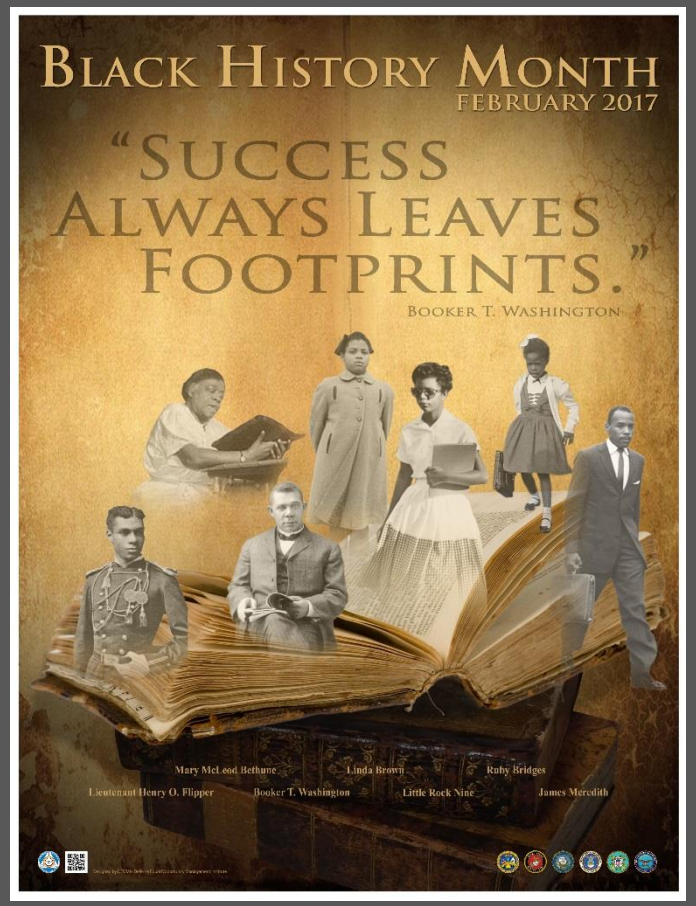
The story of Black History Month begins in 1915, half a century after the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in the United States. Few could have imagined African Americans' future contributions to education that would be recognized by the global community.

Black History Month

Credit for the evolving awareness of the true place of African Americans in history can, in large part, be attributed to one man: Carter G. Woodson.

In 1915, he established the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Woodson wanted to change the world's perception of African Americans and recognize their contributions to American society and culture.

Black History Month

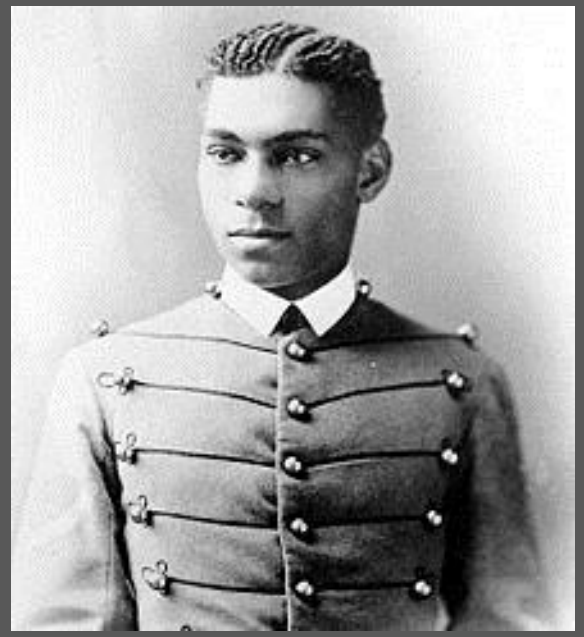


Booker T. Washington asserted, *"Success always leaves footprints."* This presentation highlights six individuals: Henry O. Flipper, Booker T. Washington, Mary McLeod Bethune, Linda Brown, Ruby Bridges, and James Meredith.

Their courage and perseverance made indelible footprints by seeking to overcome barriers to Black education—that we benefit from to this day.

Black History Month

Henry Ossian Flipper, born into slavery on March 21, 1856, was appointed to the United States Military Academy in 1873.



Over the next four years he overcame harassment, isolation, and insults to become West Point's first African-American graduate—and commissioned officer—in the regular U.S. Army.

Black History Month

Flipper was first stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, later served at Forts Elliott, Quitman, and Davis, Texas. He served as a signal officer and quartermaster, fought Apaches, installed telegraph lines, and supervised the building of roads.

At Fort Sill, the young lieutenant directed the construction of a drainage system that helped prevent the spread of malaria. Still known as "Flipper's Ditch," the ditch—commemorated by a bronze marker at Fort Sill—is listed as a National Historic Landmark.

Black History Month

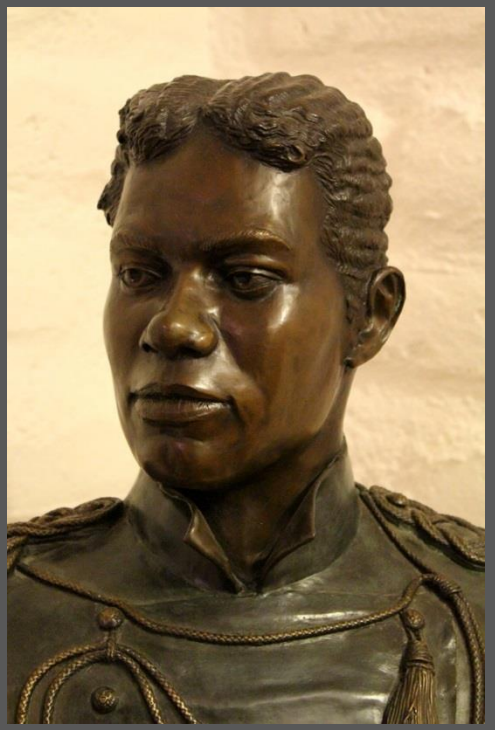
In 1881, while serving at Fort Davis, Flipper's commanding officer accused him of embezzling money from commissary funds. A court-martial found him not guilty of embezzlement, but convicted him of conduct unbecoming an officer and ordered him dismissed from the Army.

After his dishonorable discharge, he fought to clear his name. In 1976, thirty-six years after his death, the U.S. Army reviewed his case and posthumously awarded Flipper an honorable discharge dated June 30, 1882.

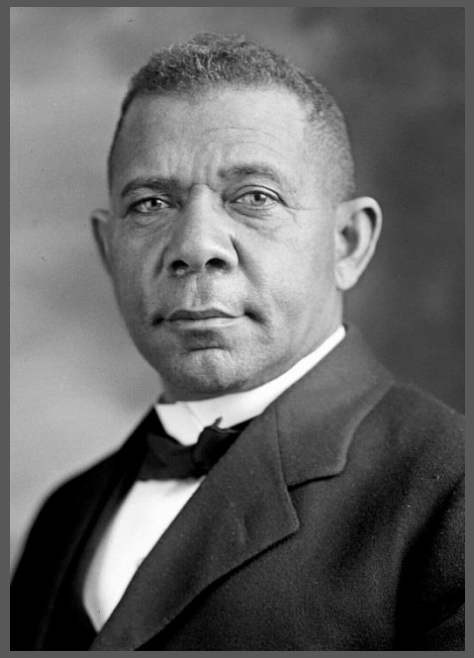
Black History Month

President Bill Clinton pardoned Flipper in 1999; this was the final act of vindication of Flipper's military service, and acknowledged the racism he had endured.

West Point now gives an award in his honor to the graduating senior who has displayed "the highest qualities of leadership, self-discipline, and perseverance in the face of unusual difficulties while a cadet."



Black History Month



Booker T. Washington was considered the most influential Black educator of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was also the most famous Black man in America between 1895 and 1915.

Born a slave on a small farm in the Virginia backcountry, he worked in the salt furnaces and coal mines of West Virginia. Determined to educate himself, in 1872 he traveled hundreds of miles under great hardship until he arrived—broke, tired, and dirty—at the Hampton Institute, in New York state.

Black History Month

He became a star pupil under the tutelage of Hampton's headmaster, General Samuel Chapman Armstrong. In 1881, Armstrong recommended Washington to be the Tuskegee Institute's first leader.

Starting with a broken-down building, he won the commitment of White Southerners and Northern philanthropists to transform Tuskegee into a model school of industrial education.

Black History Month

Representing the last generation of Black leaders born into slavery, Washington was a supporter of education for freedmen and their descendants in the post-Reconstruction, Jim Crow-era South.

Throughout the final years of his life, he maintained his standing through a nationwide network of supporters for his views on social and educational issues for Blacks. He also gained access to top national leaders in politics, philanthropy and education, and received honorary degrees from Harvard and Dartmouth Universities.

Black History Month

Born on a farm near Mayesville, South Carolina in 1875, Mary McLeod Bethune, the 15th child of former slaves, rose from humble beginnings to become a world-renowned educator, civil and human rights leader, champion for women and young people, and an advisor to five U.S. Presidents.

Black History Month

McLeod worked in the fields alongside her parents and siblings until she enrolled, at the age of 10, in the one-room Trinity Presbyterian Mission School. There, she learned to read and, as she later noted, *"the whole world opened to me."*

She studied at Scotia Seminary in North Carolina and Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, with the goal of becoming a missionary. When no missionary positions became available, she became a teacher. She later married Albertus Bethune. Her dream of opening her own school took Bethune to Florida.

Black History Month

On October 3, 1904, Bethune opened the Daytona Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls with $1.50, faith in God, and five little girls: Lena, Lucille, and Ruth Warren, Anna Geiger and Celest Jackson.

In 1923, Bethune's school merged with Cookman Institute of Jacksonville, Florida and became co-educational. It was one of the few institutions below the Mason-Dixon Line where African Americans could achieve an education higher than a high school diploma.

Black History Month

The school's name was officially changed to Bethune-Cookman College in 1931 to reflect the leadership of Mary McLeod Bethune.

Until her death in 1955 at the age of 79, she continued to be an important voice for human rights and education for women and minorities, working tirelessly to influence legislation benefiting African Americans and women.

Black History Month

Linda Brown was born on February 20, 1942, in Topeka, Kansas, to Leola and Oliver Brown.

Though she and her two younger sisters grew up in an ethnically-diverse neighborhood, she was forced to walk four miles to school when there was another school just four blocks away from her home.

Black History Month

In 1950, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) asked a group of parents—which included Brown's father—to attempt to enroll their children in all-White schools, with the expectation that they would be turned away.

The strategy was for the civil rights group to file a lawsuit on behalf of the families. The objective of the case was to bring down the precedent set by the 1896 decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which sanctioned the idea of "separate but equal" facilities along racial lines. The lead attorney working on behalf of the plaintiffs was future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.

Black History Month

The U.S. Supreme Court issued its historic *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 347 U.S. 483*, on May 17, 1954.

Citing the 14th Amendment, the decision declared all laws establishing segregated schools to be unconstitutional, and called for the desegregation of all schools throughout the nation.


School Segregation Banned, the *Topeka State Journal*.

STATE THE TOPEKA JOURNAL Home Edition

FOLKS AND THINGS
By 2054 This Bill Should Be Terrific

SCHOOL SEGREGATION BANNED

Turnpike Bonds

"Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local government. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society... WE CONCLUDE THAT IN THE FIELD OF PUBLIC EDUCATION THE DOCTRINE OF 'SEPARATE BUT EQUAL' HAS NO PLACE. SEPARATE EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES ARE INHERENTLY UNEQUAL."

Supreme Court Refutes Doctrine of Separate but Equal Education

High Tribunal Fails to Specify When Practice of Dual Schools Must Be Dropped by States

Court Ruling Hailed

Segregation Already Ending School Officials

Oliver L. Brown, et al. vs Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, United States Supreme Court, May 17, 1954.

Black History Month

After the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the NAACP attempted to register Black students in previously all-White schools in cities throughout the South.

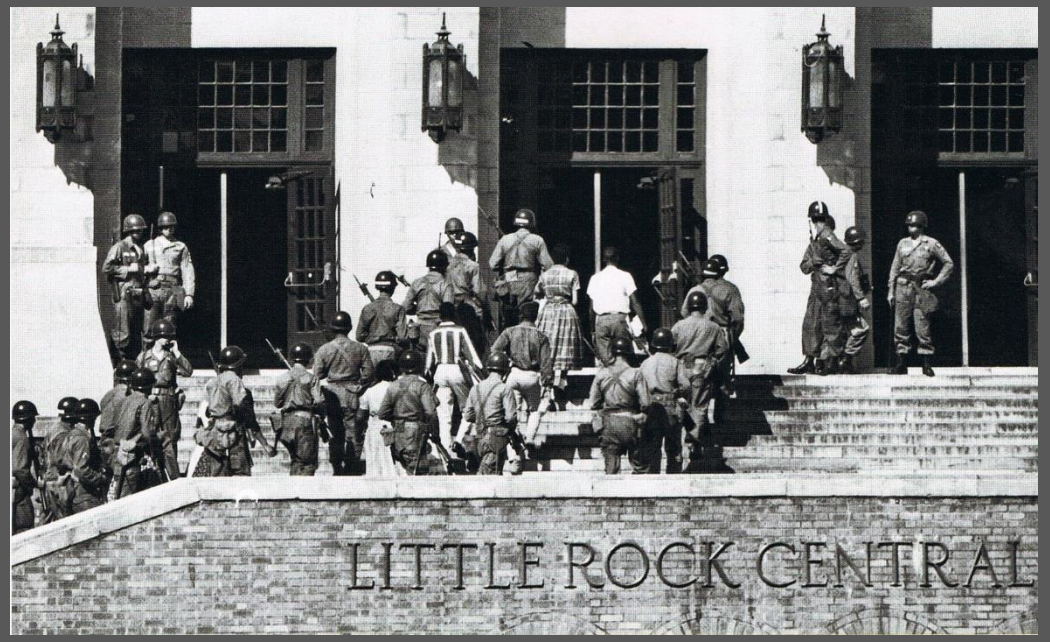
In Little Rock, Arkansas, the school board agreed to comply with the high court's ruling. Virgil Blossom, the Superintendent of Schools, submitted a plan of gradual integration to the school board on May 24, 1955, which the board unanimously approved. The plan would be implemented during the fall of the 1957 school year.

Black History Month

Seventeen African-American students were selected to attend the all-White Central High School in 1957 but, by opening day, the number had dwindled to nine.

The day before school opened, Governor Orval Faubus called the National Guard to surround Central High, declaring *"blood would run in the streets"* if the nine students attempted to enter.

Black History Month



On September 24th, Little Rock Mayor, Woodrow Mann, sent a special request to President Dwight Eisenhower for federal assistance.

The following day the students entered Little Rock Central under the protection of 101st Airborne Division soldiers of the U. S. Army.

Black History Month

The Little Rock Nine, as they have become known, finished the school year in 1958. The single high school senior, Ernest Green, graduated that year under Federal Protection.

The same year, Faubus closed all high schools in Little Rock to prevent continuing desegregation. They reopened in August 1959 under the protection of local police. Only four of the nine students returned.

Black History Month

In 1956, U.S. District Court Judge J. Skelly Wright ordered the desegregation of New Orleans public schools. In 1960 Wright set down a plan that required the integration of the schools on a grade-per-year basis, beginning with the first grade.

The School Board tested Black kindergartners to determine the most promising candidates. Ruby Bridges was one of six children selected. Two of the six stayed at their old school, three were transferred to McDonogh No. 19—another all-White school—and became known as the McDonogh Three.

Black History Month

On November 14th, Bridges entered William Frantz Elementary. She and her mother were escorted to school by four federal marshals during the first year.

The Bridges family suffered for their decision to send her to William Frantz: her father lost his job, the grocery store where the family shopped refused them service, and her grandparents, who were Mississippi sharecroppers, were turned off their land.

Black History Month

Ruby completed the first grade alone with the support of Barbara Henry, a Boston teacher, and Dr. Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist.

Black History Month

James Meredith was born in Mississippi in 1933, and was raised on a farm with nine siblings. He spent nine years in the U.S. Air Force before enrolling in Jackson State College—an all-Black school—in Mississippi.

Motivated by President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, Meredith decided to exercise his constitutional rights and apply to the University of Mississippi.

Black History Month

He wrote in his application that he wanted admission for his country, race, family, and himself. He said, *"Nobody handpicked me…I believed, and believe now, that I have a Divine Responsibility…I am familiar with the probable difficulties involved in such a move as I am undertaking and I am fully prepared to pursue it all the way to a degree from the University of Mississippi."*

He was admitted; however, his admission was withdrawn after the registrar discovered his race.

Black History Month

Since all public educational institutions had been ordered to desegregate, Meredith filed a suit alleging discrimination. The district court ruled against him; the case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in his favor.

After winning a 16-month legal battle in September 1962, a federal court ordered the University of Mississippi to accept him.

Black History Month

Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett disobeyed the decree and had Meredith physically barred from enrolling. Rioting erupted, and Attorney General Robert Kennedy sent 500 federal marshals to the scene. Two men were killed and more than 300 injured in the turmoil.

After days of violence and rioting, Meredith enrolled on October 1, 1962.

Black History Month

He endured threats, harassment, and extreme isolation, but still graduated on August 18, 1963 with a degree in political science, becoming the first Black graduate at the University of Mississippi.

Black History Month

Historically the barriers these brave individuals faced had remained impenetrable. Still, through their persistent resolve, they overcame formidable obstacles and—for the first time—successfully fought to receive an education.

Flipper, Washington, Bethune, Brown, the Little Rock Nine, Bridges, Meredith—and many others whose stories have not been told—established crucial precedents that created a quantum shift and paved the road for educational opportunities at all levels for Black Americans.

Resources

http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/brown/brown-aftermath.html
https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/07/15/president-obama-meets-civil-rights-icon-ruby-bridges
http://www.cookman.edu/
https://www.nps.gov/mamc/learn/historyculture/people_marymcleodbethune.htm
http://www.tuskegee.edu/about_us/legacy_of_leadership/booker_t_washington.aspx
http://www.npr.org/news/specials/olemiss/

Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, Patrick Air Force Base, Florida January 2017

Dawn W. Smith

All photographs are public domain and are from various sources, as cited.

The findings in this report are not to be construed as an official DEOMI, U.S. military services, or Department of Defense position.